

OPINION

BOI MELA BEGINS

Are publishers prepared?

We are hostage to our own poor planning and short-sightedness



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

The Amar Ekushey Boi Mela of 2022 has begun again after much apprehension, delays, and uncertainties. We are once again faced with questions about how we want to see the Ekushey Boi Mela performing this year, particularly since the fair was a disaster for most publishers in 2021.

MAHRUKH MOHIUDDIN

First, the government authorities are always behind in planning and leave things for the last minute to reach concrete decisions, and often, these decisions don't take into consideration pragmatic solutions that are sustainable and maintainable in the long term. The pandemic and the uncertainties associated with it have definitely contributed adversely in this tendency of waiting for the last minute to decide on the course of action for any public gathering. However, for a book fair that involves heavy investments, both from the state and private entrepreneurs, it is not well understood why a planning framework cannot be developed ahead of time, so that all stakeholders can formulate their game plan accordingly. It is only fair to everyone involved that they know what to expect—whether there will be a fair or not; if yes, then in what modality.

From the beginning of the pandemic, we knew that there will be a "new normal" which will inevitably be hybrid in nature. However, we paid no heed to this obvious possibility, and made no effort in engaging into a sustainable and forward-looking plan that will not only apply for the pandemic period, but will also be relevant for a post-pandemic "new normal" phase.

Many discussions, consultations, and proposals took place in the direction of the new modality of the book fair last year, taking into consideration the business interest of the publishing sector, safety precautions for people attending the fair, and also the newly developed online purchase behaviour of buyers. None were executed, however, and we ended up being subject to an ill-planned fair, part of which was further affected by another lock-down towards the middle of March 2021. The publishing industry was held hostage to poor and reactive planning on the part of the implementation institution

(Bangla Academy), and an ill-informed and short-sighted advocacy from the publishers' associations.

We could have used this year as an opportunity to prepare with a more equipped arrangement for a post-pandemic period; but Bangla Academy and the publishers' associations made little effort in truly utilising our talents and expertise that were fully capable of delivering such a plan. We expect more decisive leadership from Bangla Academy as an autonomous body. Their inability to formulate a pragmatic plan for the book fair independently, based on the health ministry's directives, have affected the most important book event in the year, and in all likelihood, the outcome will be less than expected this year as well.

In an interview earlier in the year, I was asked why publishers in our country are

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claiming that they have incurred "huge losses" whereas some surveys show that people read more during the pandemic. Global data also shows that the publishing industry has not suffered the pandemic nearly to the extent that was initially feared. According to the World Economic Forum, book sales have gone up in the UK and US markets, and appreciation for print books have revived.

My response (based on instinct in the absence of hard and reliable data) is four-pronged: (a) this sector in Bangladesh is plagued with unplanned and reactive initiatives rather than long-term, informed

market analysis and sustainable solutions for players of all sizes and nature; (b) the distribution and production eco-system we require for a functioning publishing sector, with robust backward and forward integration, is largely absent in our country; (c) our production costs are unnecessarily high (we bear the burden of an insane amount of tax imposed on paper), therefore making our product uncompetitive in the regional market; (d) we have been extremely tardy in jumping on the online sales and eBook bandwagon.

These have been age-old problems of the sector, but they have come back to bite us harder when times are bad. A handful of private enterprises who were prepared with their platforms and ammunition, namely Rokomari.com, Batighar, Prothoma, predictively fared well through online sales.

Why have we not made any active effort in reducing the cost of production or focused on a functional distribution network in Bangladesh? Again, my short answer would be that most publishers who provide leadership in the sector don't care much about the actual readers in the country. Their priorities are catering to various projects, government purchases, and to non-authors who are prepared to finance their book production. These are unavoidable realities in a market where true commitment to developing and promoting readership is largely absent, and the knowledge ecosystem hardly supports the survival of a true publisher.

The pandemic gave us a much-needed push to move to the next level of publishing and for connecting with a changing world that we were choosing to ignore. How smartly we respond to this push will determine our sustenance and relevance as an industry.

Mahrugh Mohiuddin is Managing Director, University Press Limited (UPL).

THE SHELF

Novels to look out for at Ekushey Boi Mela this year

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

Palowan Bhai

Anisul Hoque (Batighar)

This novel explores the adventures of one Rustam, better known as Palowan Bhai. In Dhaka, even the wild animals fear Palowan Bhai for his quick-to-rise temper. But what happens when he visits the calm community of a village?

Priyotom Oshukh Shey

Sadat Hossain (Anyaprakash)

Sadat Hossain's protagonist, Obonti, receives anonymous letters with poems and wonders



who the sender might be. One night, a deadly bullet hits her window and sets forth a series of adventures. Hossain's new novel talks about the unpredictable events of life, exploring death as the ultimate truth.

Obhirup

Sadia Khan Subasini (Tamralipi)

Subasini's new novel explores the life of Troyee through her relationship with Obhirup. Five years of relationship, followed by separation, leaves behind an incomplete void in Troyee's life. As a young



girl with a broken heart, she sets on a new journey with the crime squad, only to return to where things were supposed to begin.

Ottopor Kobi Monche Uthlen

Monowarul Islam (Nalanda)

This story explores the life of Kabir, revolving around murder, blood and poetry. These things help him survive but he no longer finds the thrill in killing people and wants to bring one of his victims back to life. Following three murders, an investigation reveals that the poet is suffering from a rare hereditary disease. The mystery continues as Islam explores the several dimensions of crime.



PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

THE BOOK REPORT

What does it take to prepare for Ekushey Boi Mela?

NAHALY NAFISA KHAN

Every February, the book fair celebrates our love for language and literature, with festivities that last for a month. But what does it take to prepare for a fair this big? In this story, we talk to binders, publishers, and other individuals involved with the process to get insights on the preparations of the fair.

Read this article on *The Daily Star* website and on Daily Star Books' Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

BOOK REVIEW: GRAPHIC NONFICTION

A family grows into its skeletons

RUSHMILA SHEHREEN KHAN

Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic (Houghton Mifflin, 2006) unfurls with heated family dysfunction, subtle and soaring ugliness, shame, and queer confusion. This is a story of a closeted gay father and his queer daughter, and how their bearings align.

On first impression, Bruce Bechdel is an authoritarian father with a desperate need for superficial perfection. While he succumbs to society's censure, his suppressed self manifests in the aspects of his life he can control. He fixates on the restoration of their home, obsessed with keeping it pristine, controlling every bit of their lives from clothing to decor. Despite Alison's tendency to dress masculine from an early age, Bruce insists on changing this. "Not only were we inverts, we were inversions of each other. While I was trying to compensate for something unmanly in him, he was attempting to express something feminine through me", Alison reflects at one point in the book. "It was a war of cross-purposes, and so doomed to perpetual escalation."

A lot of Alison's writing and philosophy are strongly influenced by Joyce and Proust. She compares Bruce to Dedalus, for the precision of his craft and the way his death conveniently aligns with the time he was reading Camus. These frequent allusions to other literary works, queer literature especially, is an attempt to seek shared experiences while living in a homophobic society. Bechdel writes, "I employ these allusions to



COLLAGE: RUSHMILA SHEHREEN KHAN

James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms. And perhaps my cool aesthetic distance itself does more to convey the Arctic climate of our family than any particular literary comparison." Understanding queer interpretations of both Homer's *Odyssey* and Joyce's *Ulysses* is the key to truly grasping the parallels Bechdel draws.

A lot of the family's dynamics parallels Noah Baumbach's film, *The Meyerowitz Stories* (2017), in that the disorder evokes the same feelings of detachment, and explores the difficulty of communicating with disengaged family members. *Fun*

Home is peppered with the same tones of comedic pizzazz and despondency that make up Baumbach's signature of tragicomedies.

Eventually, the focus of the story shifts from the family to the narrator's personal life as a queer college freshman, and how living with a closeted parent with a secret has out-turned and influenced her own experiences.

While she retells these experiences, Alison presents herself as a meticulous artist and an eloquent and articulate writer. Both her use of words and imagery are dense. Every panel in the graphic memoir is vital to the storytelling—the detailed illustrations of maps, notebooks, and book covers are clues that take us a step further to understanding the characters. At times, you can join the dots of what

Bechdel writes, "I employ these allusions to James and Fitzgerald not only as descriptive devices, but because my parents are most real to me in fictional terms."

Alison is reading to what is happening in her life. The duotone sketches keep the reader undistracted. Alison's work is one of a kind, standing undisputed as a poignant work of queer literature and a vulnerable insight into the psyche of an unusual household.

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